

Exile and the kingdom



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Amid the feverish horror of rampant sickness and death, *The Plague* is a parable of human remoteness and the struggle to share existence. In studying the relationships which Camus sets forth, the relationship between man and lover, mother and son, healer and diseased, it can be seen that the only relationship Camus describes is that between the exiled, and the kingdom for which he searches with tortured longing." Thus the first thing that plague brought to our town was exile."(p. 71). The first exile Camus writes is the physical exile of a diseased town from the world, and consequently, the exile of the town's people from the kingdom of everyday. The particular torture of this exile is memory; once expelled from a kingdom, the kingdom ceases to exist, living on only as " a memory that serves no purpose... ha[s] a savor only of regret."(p. 73). Thus the townspeople are haunted by memories of their distant loved ones and their interrupted lives, creating islands of their own exile- an exile intensified by years of monotonous selfish habit. " The truth is that everyone is bored, and devotes himself to cultivating habits."(p. 4). The pea-counter is the ultimate representation of this exile; he is completely removed from the reality of man, measuring his life in the perpetual repetition of an absurd activity. Through the character of Rambert, Camus defines plague as precisely this selfish exile of habit, this doing "...the same thing over and over and over again..."(p. 161). Exile is further compounded by the desperation with which many of the characters fling themselves into the quest of trying to regain their personal remembered kingdoms. Rambert the visiting journalist is the most pronounced example; literally trying to escape the exiled town, he makes mad efforts to return to his kingdom of romantic love, although ultimately he comes to realize that selfishness renders this kingdom empty.

Grand, who is exiled by his inarticulateness is perpetually trying to end isolation by completing his manuscript; unfortunately he can never finish the first sentence. An anonymous crazed plague victim rushes out to the street and embraces the first woman he sees, trying to break out of the awful isolation of the selfish, trying to share his exile. The kingdoms these townspeople search to regain never existed, and they suffer in the most profound and hopeless exile of man from man. The exile and the kingdom of which Father Paneloux preaches is the exile of man from the Garden. The plague now becomes a pestilence of the soul, a punishment of evil, a manifestation of the Divine Wrath. In his sermon of the first Week of Prayer, Paneloux warns that “ God has... laid low those who hardened themselves against Him...”(p. 95). At the time of this sermon Father Paneloux “...hasn’t yet come into contact with death; that’s why he can speak with such assurance of the truth...”(p. 126). Over the year after this first sermon, Paneloux descends from his pulpit to the depths of real human suffering, joining Rieux in his campaign against the plague. It is during this time, after Paneloux witnesses the excruciating, prolonged death of a child, that he removes himself once and for all from the kingdom of humanity, stepping back up to his pulpit, placing himself in exile on the path to the kingdom of God. By the time of his sermon of the second Week of Prayer, Father Paneloux has carried his view of the plague to a level of radicalism. Reasoning that God’s will must be embraced as one’s own, he denounces resistance against the plague as heresy. In strange irony, he tells the story of a Bishop who exiles himself in an ancient time of plague only to have “ corpses rain[ed] down on his head.”(p. 228). This same story is Paneloux’s; by embracing the plague and decrying resistance, he himself has renounced the

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world of man. He has exiled himself from humanity to search for the kingdom of God; a search equally as isolating and selfish, and, as the reader is informed by Camus' atheism, equally as futile as the townspeople's search for the kingdom of past. It is between these two kingdoms, the kingdom of remembered but nonexistent happiness, and the kingdom of heaven awaited, that Camus' truth is found; the kingdom of humanity. Despite his professed atheism, Camus communicates through Rieux a faith in the great spirit of man; although following no god, his main character betrays a spirituality rooted in selfless action and "common decency"(p. 163). Rieux moves beyond pity ("...what purpose could [pity] serve..."(p. 90)) to compassion, a transition which renders Rieux free to act one-pointedly against the plague; Rieux is the only man in Oran who has a clear view to this path of action. "For the moment I(Rieux) know this; there are sick people and they need curing."(p. 127). "...and there can be no true goodness nor true love without the utmost clear-sightedness...". And though Rieux from behind the guise of narrator discourages the reader from labelling this action heroic, the very existence of the novel is proof to the reader that Rieux is Camus' hero. It is precisely this sense of "common decency" which sets him apart, renders him uncommon in a town of men exiled from each other by selfishness. Rieux is not searching for anything, he is merely doing what has to be done to fight the plague. His will to see man healed has freed him from his own search, and thus from exile; no longer in exile, Rieux has found eternal kingdom. For Camus tells us there is no kingdom but present humanity, though we spend lifetimes searching in isolation for assurance in a future or a past. And there is no exile except that which the selfish man imposes on himself. It is by giving up the fruitless search for the

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non-existent that man can ultimately free himself from exile, and gain the eternal kingdom of present.